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## Reading workshop and vocabulary knowledge : allies in comprehension

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## Reading workshop and vocabulary knowledge : allies in comprehension

### Abstract

The Reading Workshop develops a purpose for reading, gives students a greater sense of their own efficacy, broadens understanding of reading strategies, provides a context that supports the student choice of what is read, and allows integration of prior knowledge in what is read (Kletzien & Hushion, 1992). Students are able to construct and direct their own learning in the Reading Workshop by reading books of their independent choice, respond to what is read, and receive mini-skill instruction on reading strategies. Students are invited to be actively involved in a process that is consistent with whole language philosophy (Atwell, 1987). They are motivated to practice reading which often solves many reading problems that children experience (Swift). Workshop classrooms are not a time of chaos, but a time of active literacy (McAndrew, 1993).

READING WORKSHOP AND VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE: ALLIES IN  
COMPREHENSION

A Graduate Journal Article Paper  
Submitted to the  
Division of Reading and Language Arts  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
in Partial Fulfillment  
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Master of Arts in Education  
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by

Ellen Cutting

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# **Reading Workshop and Vocabulary Knowledge: Allies in Comprehension**

## **The White Horse**

The youth walks up to the horse, to put its halter on  
and the horse looks at him in silence.  
They are so silent they are in another world.

D.H. Lawrence, 1885-1930

From Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence. Copyright \_\_\_\_ by Viking Penguin.

The youth and horse, a child and literature, both are so entwined with each other that the world around them is silent. The Reading Workshop allows the child and literature to be entwined, bringing them together to gain meaning through the interaction. Implementation of the Reading Workshop is a means of entwining children with literature. The Reading Workshop is flexible enough to individualize classroom instruction and tailor specific needs such as effective practices of vocabulary instruction. To understand vocabulary instruction in the Reading Workshop, I will begin by defining and explaining the Reading Workshop, the role of vocabulary in reading comprehension, the role of vocabulary in the classroom, and vocabulary in the Reading Workshop.

## **The Reading Workshop**

Instruction should grow out of children's literary experiences so the student's needs are met rather than instruction being the guiding force controlling experiences with literature (Noll & Goodman, 1995). The Reading Workshop can be compared to a road map used during a trip. The map shows direction with options to make choices to leave the main route and take side trips with the final destination in sight. The Reading Workshop is like a road map in that it provides the destination of comprehension with many side trips for students to read, write, listen, and speak their response to literature (Jackson & Pillow, 1992). The Reading Workshop is flexible and allows student choice in the literature they read and in their use of personal experience. Jackson and Pillow have established three focuses to guide the course of a Reading Workshop:

- The Literature Focus to emphasize development of a deeper appreciation of the literature selection.
- Skills lessons to focus on reading and language skills that relate to student reading and writing.
- Independent Work to give students a creative way to share literature.

These three focuses guide the entire Workshop.

The Reading Workshop develops a purpose for reading, gives students a greater sense of their own efficacy, broadens understanding of reading strategies, provides a context that supports the student choice of what is read, and allows integration of prior knowledge in what is read (Kletzien & Hushion, 1992). Students are able to construct and direct their own learning in the Reading Workshop by reading books of their independent choice, respond to what is read, and receive mini-skill instruction on reading strategies. Students are invited to be actively involved in process that is consistent with whole language philosophy (Atwell, 1987). Atwell's view of literacy (from a Whole Language perspective) focuses on the importance of student attitudes toward learning to read, how this affects students in positive ways as well as improving language arts skills (Greer, 1994). Greer says this happens because the process is individualized. In addition, the literature based Reading Workshop improves attitudes toward reading (Oppelt, 1991; Swift, 1993), and students are motivated to practice reading which often solves many reading problems that children experience (Swift). Workshop classrooms are not a time of chaos, but a time of active literacy (McAndrew, 1993).

A distinct advantage of the Workshop is its flexibility for students to move in and out according to their needs (Swift, 1993), which Greer (1994) believes allows for the process to be individualized. Standardized tests show the Reading Workshop successfully improves comprehension (Swift, 1993), and surveys show students spend more time reading in the Reading Workshop (Kletzien & Hushion, 1992).

The Reading Workshop offers other advantages as a means of reading instruction. It has proven to provide success with reading strategies, is rich in literature, individualizes student learning, and strengthens comprehension. One cannot read text when a critical mass of words are not understood (Marzano, 1991). Because of this, Marzano goes on to state that vocabulary is often the core of reading (Marzano, 1991). The same can be true for the Reading Workshop where vocabulary can be a major obstacle for readers which requires the teacher to address vocabulary instruction in some manner.

### **Vocabulary and Comprehension**

Vocabulary can be divided into two broad categories: oral and reading. Oral vocabularies are words used in spoken language, and reading vocabularies are words in written language (Graves, Watts, & Graves, 1994). Graves (1996) found children with more vocabulary

knowledge comprehend text better than those without. Graves also states that reading comprehension is increased with vocabulary instruction when the instruction includes multiple exposure to words, exposure to words in meaningful contexts, varied information about each word, establishment of ties between instructed words and student's prior knowledge, and an active role by students in the word-learning process. A student's vocabulary knowledge is a good predictor of comprehension. Because vocabulary is so important to comprehension and learning, we need to pay attention to the vocabulary in reading selections (Graves, Watts, & Graves, 1994). With vocabulary playing an important role in reading comprehension we need to ask, "What constitutes effective vocabulary instruction in a classroom reading program?"

Numerous research studies support vocabulary instruction, and the findings suggest effective techniques for application. In an effective reading program, vocabulary plays a central role in connecting reading and writing workshops. Direct vocabulary instruction integrates vocabulary with reading and writing (Marzano, 1991). Nagy (1988) agrees by stating vocabulary instruction should utilize an integrated approach in which some vocabulary is taught directly and is then used in meaningful ways in reading and writing. It is advantageous to present vocabulary instruction prior to reading, and research on word frequency and word knowledge affirms that words used frequently are widely known (Ryder & Graves, 1994). Marzano (1991) agrees with Ryder and Graves by stating vocabulary instruction should focus on high frequency words. Further research shows more findings on vocabulary instruction. Context words in highly specialized knowledge domains shouldn't be included since they are words that are not frequently used (Zechmeister, Chronis, Cull, D'Anna, and Healy, 1995). The knowledge of cognitive words is highly related to better comprehension and results in higher reading achievement percentiles in vocabulary and reading comprehension (Booth & Hall, 1994). Buikema & Graves (1993) found in their research that explicit instruction for unlocking word meaning with context clues was helpful in vocabulary instruction. These researchers support vocabulary instruction, and their studies point to approaches for instruction.

### **Vocabulary in the Classroom**

Vocabulary instruction in a whole literacy classroom provides readers a broad and rich experience with words within a framework of contextual reading, discussion, and response (Robinson, McKenna, & Wedman, 1996). Within a whole literacy classroom, deeper and more meaningful uses of words that affect comprehension can be developed through discussion of

semantic mapping, examination of context, and playful activities such as word collections contests and dramatization. Vocabulary words can be chosen from contextual reading done in the classroom along with using maps to help identify words for study, planning prereading activities, involving post reading discussion, using contextual reinspection and semantic manipulation for words that are still unclear, and using the vocabulary in an integrated way. In addition, students need to be involved in sharing prior knowledge of a word, making predictions, planning how words will be used, gathering data, and clarifying what they know about a vocabulary word to help in their progress of additional word knowledge.

### **Vocabulary in the Reading Workshop**

As stated earlier, the Reading Workshop is a method of providing reading instruction where students are actively involved within the framework of individual instruction. The students direct their own learning by reading books of their choice, by responding to the readings, and by receiving reading strategy skill instruction through mini lessons. Vocabulary knowledge (both spoken and written) helps a child to better comprehend text. Strengthening vocabulary knowledge results from direct vocabulary instruction and integration into reading and writing. Vocabulary instruction also needs to lie within the framework of the Reading Workshop where the vocabulary words come from contextual reading within the classroom. As a third grade teacher of 19 students, I was concerned when my students would stop reading to ask the meaning of a word, or when they just skipped the word. Comprehension was being lost in discussion, literature logs, and retelling responses. Since the literature supports direct vocabulary instruction as being more effective in learning, I chose to incorporate a child centered direct approach. I began by asking myself, "What do I do to make direct vocabulary instruction possible in a child centered reading workshop and would it be effective?"

### **The Beginning**

After much reading and study on the topic of effective literacy learning, I became dissatisfied with basal reading instruction. (In fact, the only time I have used a basal reading program was during student teaching.) The basal approach seemed too restrictive for a student to develop a sense of independence and enthusiasm toward reading. I have taught for eight years, the first two as a science and math teacher in a fifth grade classroom and the later six teaching all subjects in a self contained third grade classroom. Third grade is where the excitement and pleasure of teaching reading began for me.



Struggling to find an effective and interesting method for reading instruction, I taught with multiple copies of chapter length books. A reading program was developed by using different chapter length books of different reading levels and had similar themes. Grouping was determined only on the basis of the book that was chosen by a student. In small groups, they read an assigned number of pages while studying assigned vocabulary. Skills were taught to the entire class and incorporated into written assignments pertaining to their book. This reading instruction allowed for independence by giving students a choice of what to read and allowed for implementation of skills and strategies. This strategy worked well but did not seem to allow for enough student choice that would instill and encourage a love for reading.

### **The Reading Workshop in My Third Grade Classroom**

I first implemented the Reading Workshop four years ago in my third grade classroom. Students chose their own reading material from the numerous paperback books I had accumulated through book orders. To help in selection of a book, students used a five finger rule in which they read the first page of a book. If no more than five words were unfamiliar to them, they read through the next four pages to assure themselves that both the interest and ability levels were appropriate (Jackson & Pillow, 1992).

After selection, the children kept track of the pages read during reading time, placing emphasis on reading for quality, enjoyment, and comprehension, not for speed. During student reading time I met individually with students as they read portions of their book to me. At this time I individually taught reading skills (such as prediction, retelling, and confirming to name a few), checked for comprehension through discussion with the child, and checked the appropriate reading level. Further rechecking of comprehension was done through written retellings in literature logs.

Children's picture books were used to facilitate teaching of daily skills. Each day I read a book or an excerpt that pertained to a specific reading skill. As a class, we applied the skill lesson to that book. Next the children applied the skill in a written response to the book they were reading.

I continually work on improving the effectiveness of the Reading Workshop within my classroom. Acquisition of vocabulary knowledge has been a difficult area since students are all reading different books. In order to improve this lack of direct vocabulary instruction, I began using different approaches to find an effective method for students to increase vocabulary

knowledge. Over a six month period I developed a vocabulary instruction that included the following progressive four steps:

1. The child selected an unknown word.
2. Guesstimate for the meaning of the unknown word.
3. Use of a resource to confirm the word's meaning.
4. The child webs the word for connections.

### **Vocabulary Instruction Into Practice**

In the first step my students were assigned to mark an unknown word everyday in their book with a sticky note paper. That word became the day's vocabulary word. Marking their words with sticky notes occurred during reading time when all students were silently reading their own book. The word was the child's choice and was from their book. Many times students had more than one unknown word and completed assignments for the additional words as extra credit. Sometimes a child marked too many words. These occasions caused concern that perhaps the reading level of the book may be too high for the child. For most, finding a word was often an easy task. Once in awhile someone would say they couldn't find an unfamiliar word. In this case, the student chose a word they knew the meaning of, but wanted to find deeper meaning. This task was enjoyed by all since they were active in the decision process of their learning.

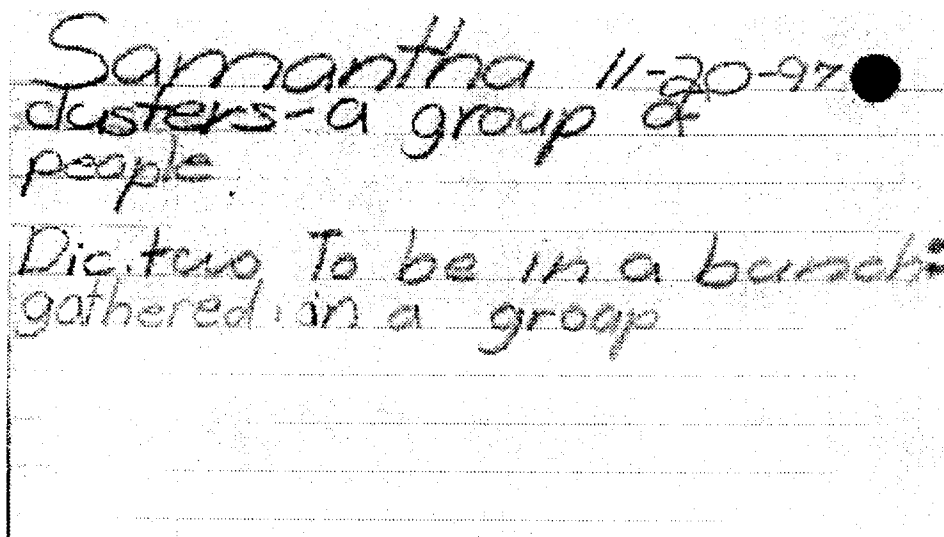
The second step of vocabulary instruction was for the student to actually guesstimate the meaning of their vocabulary word within the context of their reading and check their guesstimate with a resource. The students wrote their word on one card from a stack of index cards that were held together by a metal clasp ring. They tried to figure out the meaning of the word using context clues, cloze procedure, etc. In the beginning, this task was very confusing and too difficult for anyone to accomplish without assistance. Therefore, I met briefly with each student to help them figure out the meaning of their vocabulary word to fit the context of their sentence. Using the context of the sentence or paragraph was most successful for students to unlock meaning. They enjoyed using this strategy and realized there were keys to find meaning. Needless to say, this took a lot of my time (about three minutes per child) but was a necessary step to guide them toward independence. Later on the students met with peers to successfully accomplish this task which demanded less help from me.

I was concerned that peer help would prompt students to share the same vocabulary word in order to complete their assignment sooner, but this didn't happen. They enthusiastically helped

each other but were interested in keeping their own vocabulary word.

After the contextual meaning was decided, the third step began. A resource was used to check the accuracy of the student's contextual meaning for their vocabulary word. I incorporated the step of using a resource to ensure that accurate meaning was uncovered. The dictionary was the chosen resource for students to check for accuracy. They wrote the number and definition of the dictionary meaning on the index card below their own definition. At first this task also proved to be too difficult to complete without assistance. The students had a hard time finding the word in the resource, but by focusing on alphabetical order and receiving peer assistance, everyone eventually found the meaning they sought. To reinforce the fact that there are different meanings for one word, I had them write the number of the definition that met their meaning. This also encouraged the student to read more than the first definition given. Again students were able to accomplish this task of finding the resource meaning of their word with peer help. An example of the steps describe so far can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1



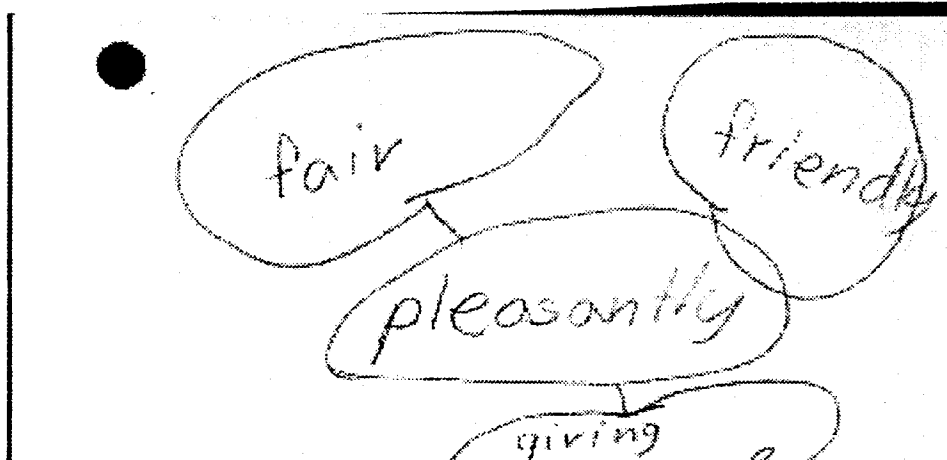
This process continued for two weeks as students became more proficient deciding word meaning and determining appropriate dictionary meanings. It was time to wean away from the daily meetings, but I needed a system to check if students chose correct meaning. The step of choosing a vocabulary word, deciding contextual meaning, and checking accuracy of the meaning against a resource remained the same. To lessen the amount of time I assisted students, they were asked to eliminate writing their own definitions on an index card and instead discuss their meaning with peers. After the discussions, students wrote down the vocabulary word, the sentence from

their book it was found, and underlined the vocabulary word within the sentence. Finding the correct contextual dictionary meaning and adding it to the index-card remained the same because it acted as a check to see if meaning discussed in small groups met the same information as the resource. By having the entire sentence written on the card, I could easily see if the student had gained word knowledge within the context of their word.

A fourth step was undertaken to practice and apply vocabulary knowledge. This occurred three weeks after practicing the above mentioned steps. On the back of the index card students webbed the vocabulary word and added three of their own one word or small phrase definitions to the daily vocabulary word. This step was easier for students to make progress because the word was very familiar by the time they chose the word, discussed the probable meaning, and checked that meaning with a resource. Each day the vocabulary process was checked and students received 99% accuracy. See Figure 2 for an example of steps one through four.

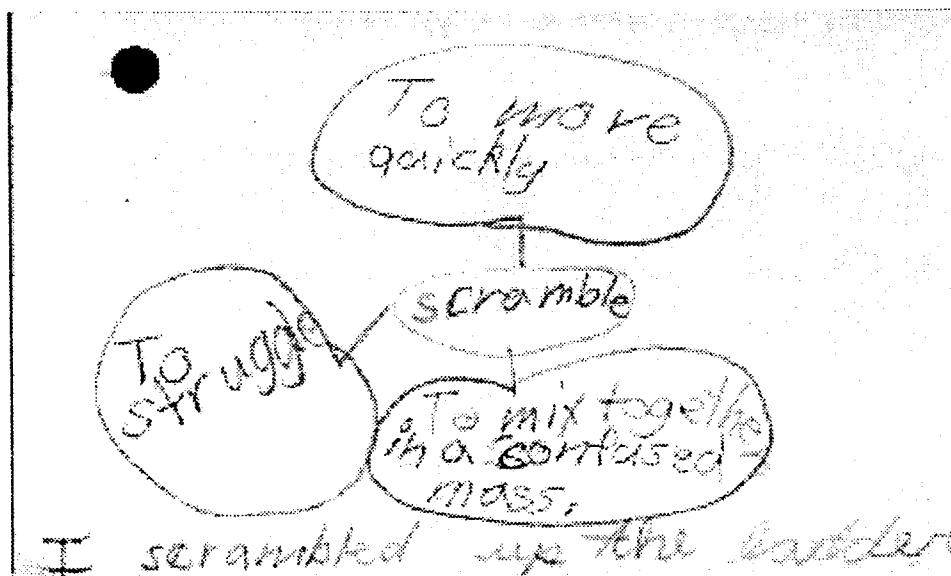
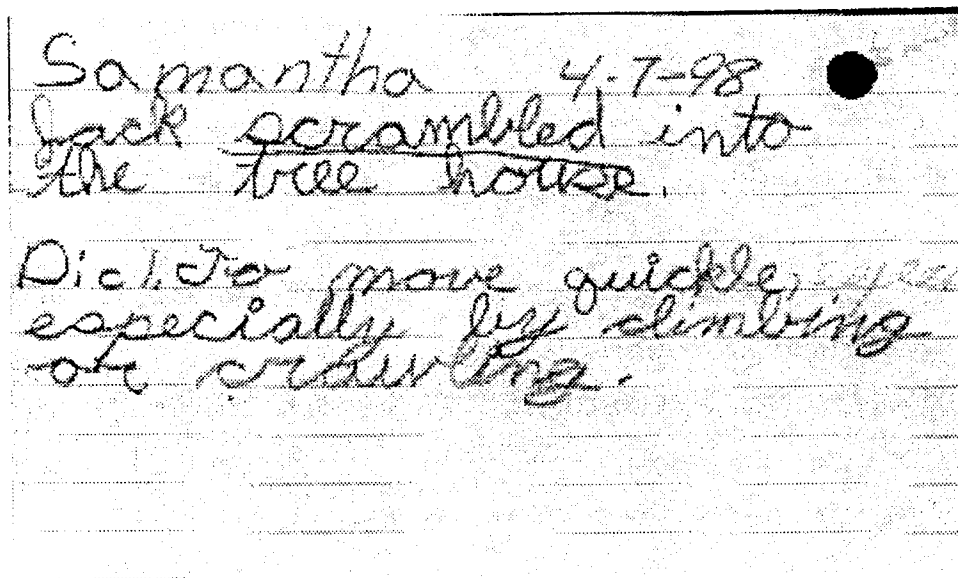
Figure 2

Samantha 11-4-98  
The barn was pleasantly  
warm in winter when  
the animals spent most  
of the time there.  
Dic. ① that pleases; giving pleasure



Students continued webbing, finding their own vocabulary word, discussing meaning, and checking the meaning with a resource. After about two weeks, I started to see students use a resource to help them web meanings for their word. I saw this as inhibiting the application process, and the resource was being relied on too heavily. Therefore step four was extended and students were required daily to write a sentence using the vocabulary word. This extension proved to be successful. All sentences were original and scores revealed 99.9% accuracy. See Figure 3 for an example.

Figure 3



As part of instruction, once a week the class orally shared word knowledge they had found throughout the week. These sharings had the advantage of peers passing on information to the class, but this activity was primarily done to provide each student with further experience of their own words as they shared.

An unexpected advantage arose from direct vocabulary instruction. Students were getting daily practice with alphabetizing skills, using a resource, plus getting daily practice using strategies to create meaning. Students were exposed to other meanings of their vocabulary when the word was seen at a later date in a different context. Alphabetizing, finding vocabulary meaning, increasing comprehension, discussion, use of a resource, peer help, and applying word knowledge were skills students experienced during this vocabulary instruction.

## **Results**

As part of instruction, once a week the class orally shared the word knowledge they had found throughout the week. These sharings had the advantage of peers passing on information to others, but the primary advantage was providing each student with further experience of their own words as they shared.

Vocabulary instruction used in the Reading Workshop allowed students to feel empowered by being able to choose their own vocabulary words. Students became a part of a decision making instructional process. They used words from their individual reading material and didn't have to work with vocabulary they already knew.

As the instructional process evolved, fewer students needed my help. Peer assistance and sharing of thoughts blossomed throughout the classroom during step two when students guesstimate word meaning. Students were taking responsibility for their own learning!

Through observations, small group retelling discussions improved after implementation of vocabulary study. More detail was involved in the discussions, students had more to say, increased participant interest was observed through better listening skills and more questions asked of the speaker.

I was hoping students would apply vocabulary words to other areas of expression. To my disappointment, this did not happen. There was not an application of vocabulary by students into other areas of oral or written language. Because of this, I wondered how successful students would be at incorporating their words into a form of writing. On two different occasions I assigned the children to write a story of their choice, using ten of their vocabulary words.

Students used the words correctly within their stories 92% and 93% of the time.

I don't believe the success of this instruction depends on voluntary application of words into written and oral forms of language. The success can be seen in reading comprehension, discussions, direct instructional activities, and retellings. But as stated by Ryder and Graves (1994) and Marzano (1991), the higher frequency of a word, the better the word is known. As a future extension of vocabulary instruction, I will encourage students to use their words as often as they feel appropriate.

## **Conclusion**

The Reading Workshop has been a means of providing reading instruction in which students are enthusiastic because they are reading what fits their particular interests and experiences in life. There is a great feeling of satisfaction in seeing my students enjoy reading and seeing their excitement and pride after finishing a book. Many adults are lucky enough to finish one or two books a year, but my students experience the accomplishment of finishing many different books in their third grade year. The Reading Workshop is a method of reading instruction that can be fine tuned and changed to meet needs and ability levels of all my students.

Incorporating direct vocabulary instruction in the Reading Workshop has provided an avenue for my students to experience vocabulary words that lie within the context of their reading by choosing their own vocabulary from the books they read. Research shows direct instruction leads to increased vocabulary knowledge and in turn greater comprehension. My students have found success in choosing their own vocabulary, finding correct meaning within the context of their sentence, and applying that vocabulary knowledge. The implementation for vocabulary study has increased successful use of listening skills, comprehension, discussion skills, alphabetizing, resource use, peer help, and application of word knowledge.

Implementing direct vocabulary instruction within my third grade Reading Workshop brings satisfied feelings of providing yet another avenue for increasing reading comprehension. The strategies for direct instruction have been implemented while individuality and benefits of the Reading Workshop are left intact.

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# A The Reading Teacher

*The Reading Teacher (RT)* is a peer-reviewed, refereed journal published eight times each year by the International Reading Association. *RT* is an open forum for the thoughtful consideration of practices, issues, and trends within the field of reading and literacy education. Submissions focusing on children's literature or the relationships between literacy and other subject areas are also welcomed. *The Reading Teacher* serves classroom teachers, reading teachers, administrators, supervisors, consultants, college/university faculty, parents, and others who are committed to improving literacy instruction for children through age 12. It is received by approximately 65,000 individuals and institutions each month.

Editorial policies and procedures are based on the philosophy of inclusion. The editors intend to enhance *RT*'s status as the premiere professional journal for literacy practitioners by increasing its access to professionals at all levels and by extending its appeal to and usefulness for a broad range of professionals interested in children's literacy learning. Five specific goals form the foundation for editorial policies and procedures:

- to provide balanced and in-depth treatment of current and enduring trends and issues that inform classroom practice;
- to encourage consideration of literacy issues within the larger context of education and society;
- to inform readers of findings and implications of recent research in literacy;
- to encourage literacy professionals from all settings to share their thoughts, practices, and scholarship; and
- to ensure a fair, formative, and professional review of all manuscripts.

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The editorial team wishes to support potential contributors to *The Reading Teacher*. Those with additional questions should write to Editorial Offices, *The Reading Teacher*, 414 White Hall, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent, OH 44242, USA. Tel. 1-330-672-4840, Fax 1-330-672-4841, E-mail RTOFFICE@KENTVM.KENT.EDU

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# Instructions for authors

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The editors will consider a variety of materials for publication in *RT*. Articles, essays, and reports of different types are appropriate submissions. **These should generally not exceed 20 single-sided, double-spaced pages.** They should deal with literacy among children in the preschool through preteen years. Articles may

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- provide thoughtful commentaries on or analyses of issues related to literacy practices or instruction;
- profile or report interviews of literacy professionals or authors or illustrators of children's books. Timely and interesting interview questions should foster lively responses from the person being interviewed. Interviews should generally not exceed 10 pages and must be accompanied by a letter from the person interviewed granting permission for *RT* to publish the interview.

Articles should have a clear purpose that is addressed in some depth. Authors must demonstrate how their work relates to or extends previous work on the topic. Figures, tables, illustrations, and photographs are acceptable, to the extent that they enhance the understanding of the article.

Research articles should report findings in a clear, straightforward style that is less formal than that required for journals that publish only research (e.g., *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Curriculum Research*).

Methodology should be reported in a concise manner, with strong emphasis placed on the applications and implications of the research findings.

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